

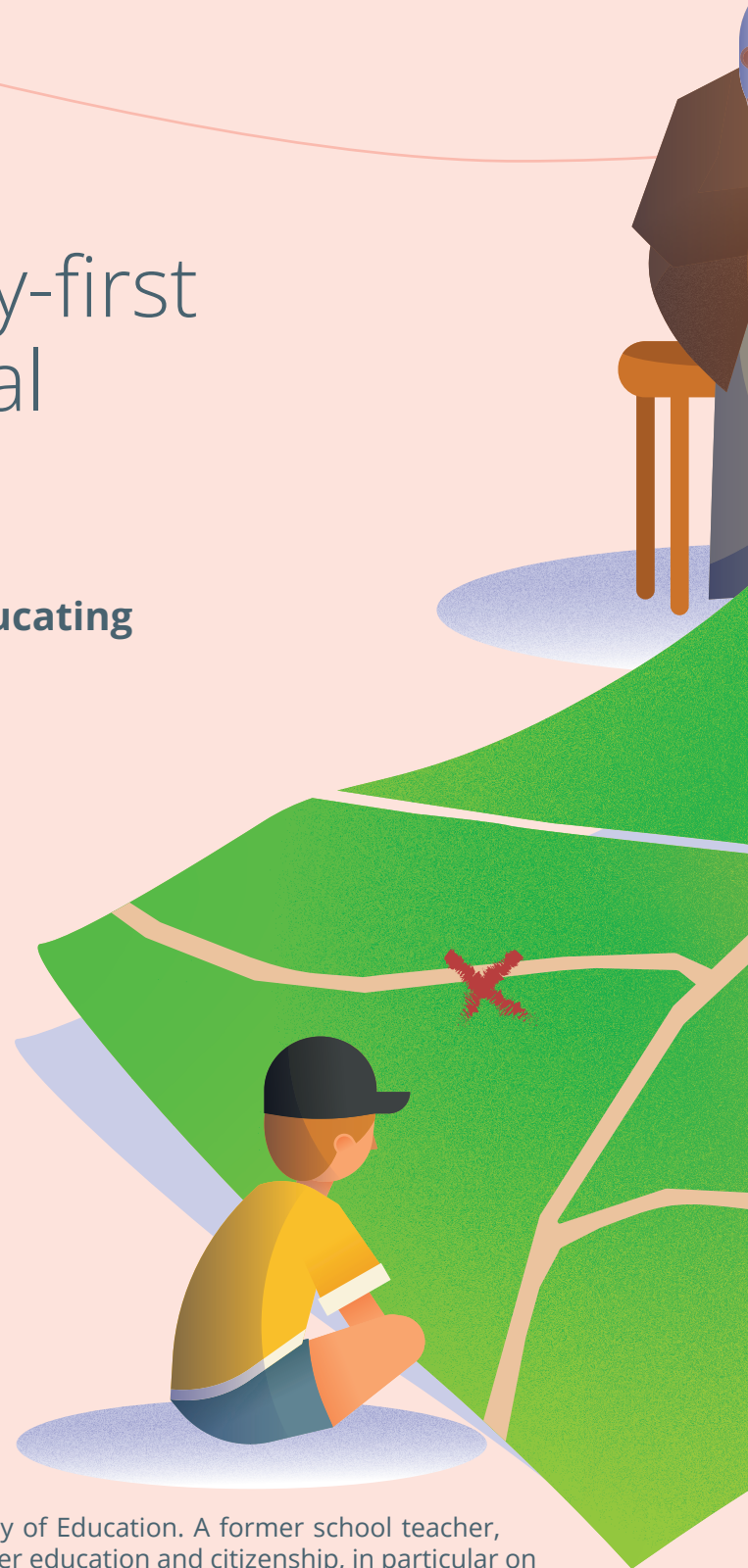
Character, a twenty-first century educational emergency

Challenges and opportunities of educating for moral and civic development

by Ana Moreno Salvo

INTERVIEW WITH ANDREW PETERSON

Andrew Peterson (Birmingham) is Professor of Character and Citizenship Education and Deputy Director of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham. He is also Head of the Department of Education and Social Justice in the Faculty of Education. A former school teacher, his research focuses on the connections between character education and citizenship, in particular on the nature of civic virtues and educating on these virtues in schools. He has written extensively on this topic, combining theoretical and empirical research to examine how schools cultivate informed, active and morally responsible citizens. His work has been published in leading academic journals and in numerous books, most recently "Civility and Democratic Education" (2019, Springer), and he has edited several major collections on citizenship and civic education.





In the book "Understanding Character Education", you and your colleagues talk about the emergence of character education in the twenty-first century. Why do you think it is emerging now?

I think there are several reasons for this resurgence, not only in the UK but also in other countries around the world, including Spain. Character education has often been framed as an answer to certain social or moral problems. There is concern about many young people's moral and political apathy, polarisation, economic inequalities and lack of involvement in communities. There is also mention of the lack of soft skills valued by employers, or the lack of resilience among young people. However, seeing character education as a reactive solution is problematic for two main reasons.

First, it reinforces a deficit view of young people, attributing responsibility and blame to them without building on the character strengths that many already possess. Secondly, it overlooks the fundamental reason for character education: to develop and express virtues, especially moral virtues, which are the basis for human and social flourishing. Character is key to a sense of purpose and belonging, especially for children and young people. If we focus on this positive perspective, another important reason to explain this resurgence arises.

In a world of challenges and complexity, character education helps us to find positive solutions and ways of living together and recognising our differences. Moreover, it offers a holistic approach at a time when academic performance and assessments dominate education systems. Many teachers and school leaders have shifted the focus to character education to balance the education students receive and to reconnect with the motivations that brought them to teaching. An Edutopia study in 2015 revealed that the qualities most valued by teachers were compassion, kindness and respect.

A final point is that character is present in everyday language. We define people by their qualities, such as whether they are kind, honest or trustworthy.

Similarly, children are interested in whether their friends are good friends or whether their teachers are patient. Schools play a key role in helping young people to explore their character and understand how their relationships with others are linked to what it means to be a good person and live a good life in community.

Character education helps us to find positive solutions and ways of living together and recognising our differences

Today there is often a holistic view of education, and many schools rely on positive education and social-emotional education or personal and social development programmes. How does this type of education differ from an education focused on character development?

I think there are important differences between character education and its not-so-distant relatives, such as positive education and social-emotional learning. However, before talking about the differences, I should highlight some important commonalities. In practice, many schools are likely to use a combination of all three. Some frameworks designed by organisations seek to integrate social-emotional learning and character education. However, I believe there are important differences in both how we conceptualise these approaches and how they are practised. At the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, we adopt a neo-Aristotelian approach to character education based on Aristotle's key ideas updated with contemporary research.

A neo-Aristotelian approach sees virtue as a medium between two extremes: excess and deficiency. For example, the virtue of courage is situated between recklessness (excess) and cowardice (deficiency). Unlike some forms of positive education and social-emotional learning, virtue is not simply having more of a quality such as empathy or courage. It is about having the right amount for the right reasons at the right times, which depends on the situation, our capacities and previous experiences that guide us towards virtuous action.

It is important to note that learning and educating in virtue are lifelong processes. Very few of us are fully virtuous, and we often fail. Character education, especially for children and young people, offers the opportunity to explore and practise virtue, as well as to reflect on their actions and experiences: Why did I do something? Why did I fail? What could I do differently next time?

This brings us to another vital difference: how we judge the right amount of virtue for the right reason at the right time. Aristotle used the term 'phronesis', or practical wisdom. This wisdom guides our behaviour in difficult situations, especially when virtues clash. A common example is the conflict between honesty and kindness. A friend says to me: 'I got a haircut. Do you like it?' My practical wisdom helps me to choose the best answer based on knowing my friend and my previous experiences.

These are not just theoretical ideas; they also have important practical relevance. We know from many schools in and outside the UK that have integrated our educational framework that these ideas are important for staff, students and families. These schools work with young people to help them to reflect on their actions, deliberate on what it means to do the right thing in each situation and learn from their experiences.

What is meant by character education at school?

At the Jubilee Centre, we define character education as all the educational activities and relationships that help children and young people to develop virtues. It is a lifelong process and does not follow a linear course. No one is perfectly virtuous, but we hope to learn from our mistakes. Children and young people need space to reflect on their mistakes and learn from them, especially during childhood and adolescence, which are key periods in this learning.

In one way or another, all schools educate in character. The question is whether they do so in a positive, intentional and planned way. It is important to note that there is no single model for character education. Each school has to make it relevant to its context, its students and its community. However, there are useful ways of thinking about character education that can be applied at any school. One is to divide the virtues into four categories: moral, intellectual, civic and acts. The latter kind of virtues, such as perseverance, only become true virtues when they serve moral and intellectual virtues. For example, a thief may be perseverant, but that does not make him virtuous.

Another key idea is to integrate character education into school life. This implies that students not only learn about virtues but also have opportunities to put them into practice and reflect on their experiences. In addition, we divide the virtues into seven components, which include the perception of which virtue is needed in which situation, knowledge of the virtues and aspects such as emotion and action.

Character involves acting with the right amount of virtue for the right reasons at the right times

There are no 'ready-made' programmes that guarantee effective character education. Schools wishing to integrate character education need to undertake a reflective process including the entire educational community to ensure that it is responsive to the needs of their students and their context.

What are the biggest challenges facing character education in schools?

There are two main challenges I would like to highlight. One is the challenge of education with concerns about high marks, examinations, academic achievement and - also linked to this - preparation for working life. This can be seen as very utilitarian

and instrumental, but it may work against or to the detriment of character education in children and young people. I think it is better to see them as different goals of education that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. When we advocate for the education of the whole child using a character education approach, we are not saying that achievement is not important. In fact, a lot of research on character education, especially in the schools we work with, shows that achievement has improved since they adopted an explicit and integrated approach to character education. The same is true for readiness for the working world. In fact, most reports on professional skills, attributes and qualities emphasise that young people with

virtues and character traits are sought after.

I think this is a challenge, not at a fundamental level but at a practical level.

A school's focus on results actually acknowledges the importance of holistic education and character education, even though they are what motivate teachers in the first place. At schools that have truly integrated character education, it becomes the core of their academic achievement, preparation for the working world and other educational goals.

I think the second challenge, which has to do with the challenges facing democracies around the world, is to find a consensus and a set of virtues or values, if you will, that we can agree on within a given



context, that are truly meaningful and inclusive, without being exclusive or overly exclusionary. I think this is the real challenge, because from an educational standpoint, it is much easier to define things at a very general and ambiguous level, because you can bring more people to the table, so to speak. This is the danger, especially when it comes to values education, that values are defined so broadly that they mean something yet nothing.

A challenge for character education is to find core virtues that people can agree on and to ensure that they are agreed upon inclusively. In character education, there is always a balance between recognising the situation in which one is acting and the virtues, but you also have to be aware that these are general, universal virtues that are considered important by many different cultures. Compassion is a good example. Most if not all cultures have some virtue akin to or aligned with compassion. This does not mean that we all understand compassion in exactly the same way. Each culture may have a different concept or term, but we can come to an agreement and consensus that this universal virtue of recognising the suffering of others is a virtue and something we would like children and young people to learn and develop.

It is difficult to find this real consensus, especially across differences and contexts. But I think it is very important to try. A lot of work has been done on this, but I think there is still a long way to go to reach a consensus on the shared virtues that are fundamental, and again, neither so narrow as to be

exclusionary nor so narrow as to be meaningless or overly ambiguous.

What is the character-based learning? What are the evidence-based benefits?

The best way to understand character-based learning is to focus on character education embedded in the school through an approach: understood, taught and sought after. Character provides a clear mission, vision and ethos that are at the heart of the school, embedded in its culture and relationships. It is not just about including character education but about it being lived out in the everyday reality of the school and in the experiences of those who interact with it.

Furthermore, character education should be reinforced in the curriculum, not necessarily as a separate subject but integrated into the content and other processes, such as assemblies. For example, I have seen schools using the virtues to explore the characters in a literature text that students are reading.

It is crucial for students to have opportunities, both within and outside the curriculum, to pursue their own character development, such as through social actions and civic activities, which enable them to contribute to their communities. Character formation should be autonomous, and young people should pursue their own opportunities as they grow older.

Regarding the evidence, we have to be cautious in interpreting it. Some studies show the benefits of interventions that develop specific virtues, such as critical thinking or empathy. Some schools assess character development holistically, and these practices work best when

they are based on a longitudinal view, assessing progress over time and engaging students in reflection about themselves and their peers.

The most compelling evidence comes from school leaders, teachers, students and families. In schools that incorporate character education, there is a greater sense of purpose and clarity, which allows for more meaningful conversations about character. These testimonials are coupled with evidence from school inspection reports and academic research. For example, in a study by the Jubilee Centre, we found a clear correlation between schools that integrate character education and students who have a greater sense of belonging and trust in their schools and local communities.

At times, fully integrated character education can be intangible. An example is like when we see a beautiful landscape and take a picture that never fully captures what we feel when we are there. Similarly, we can only fully perceive the effects of character education when we are at school and experience it first hand. While it is possible to measure it and collect testimonials, there is also an intangible aspect that we should not forget.

What responsibility do teachers have for their students' character education?

Teachers have a major responsibility for character education,

The biggest challenge is to find a consensus on what virtues should be taught in an inclusive and culturally meaningful way



Schools have to integrate character into their culture, curriculum and experiences, not just as an add-on, but as its core

but families have the primary responsibility. Both schools and teachers have the responsibility to support students' character

development. I believe that this work begins with teachers as role models for students who convey the ethos of the school through their actions, behaviour and relationships.

Take, for example, a teacher who is uninterested in what a child has to say about a

particular issue or who shows no respect or humility towards students, or worse, is even indifferent to a child's interests and even family life. I think that teacher conveys quite a different message to their students than the one who does show adequate interest in the child and takes time to listen and understand the child's interests and challenges. As good teachers know, this is about not just what happens in the classroom but also what happens in the playground and at the school gate and in the hallways, when teachers meet students and have conversations with them.

In fact, I think that sometimes these informal encounters and experiences are just as formative for young people as the more formal experiences within the classroom. I think it is also important



to note that teachers need some support in this role, whether from their colleagues, families or the wider community.

I think teachers play a key role, but they can only do so much individually or in small groups. It has to be a community-wide effort involving families and society at large.

What role do families and the community play in character education?

Families are really the primary educators of a child's character. Communities also play a positive role in children's education. In turn, it is very important for children to have the opportunity to learn from and play an active role in their communities. In this sense, the development of a common language on character is a vital aid in contributing to cohesion and collaboration among schools, families and communities. This is something we hear loud and clear from the schools we work with at the Jubilee Centre. While not everyone may share the language of character, understanding it can be the basis for constructive dialogue when there is disagreement or even conflict within a school community. In turn, this common language can also help children and young people make connections among their different experiences.

There were two points about community in the project I mentioned at the Jubilee Centre on schools, civic virtues and good citizenship.

The first was that school leaders and teachers saw schools as civic centres operating within and working for local communities. Thus, they saw schools as complementary to providing experiences for students to play

a role in the civic life of their communities. Secondly, students in the study stated that a sense of belonging and trust in their local community was always based on experiences and opportunities to participate with others in community settings. So when students said: 'Yes, I feel like I belong to my school community and to my local community', or when they said: 'Yes, I feel trust within my local community', it was always related to having experiences of meeting others in their communities. Sometimes it was about talking to neighbours. Other times, it was about participating in community events, groups, clubs, etc.

It didn't matter whether these groups were related to sport, music, scouts and guides or whatever. But it was the opportunity to spend time with others in associations and groups within the local community. In other words, for the over 1,500 10- to 16-year-old students we spoke to and surveyed, a sense of community emerged from opportunities to experience communities with others, and that played a key role in thinking, expressing, experiencing and developing character-related skills and experiences.

It is essential for us to recognise that there are complexities and challenges, just like in any relationship. I think perhaps the most important thing for schools in terms of character education, in terms of families and communities, is when there are conflicts between the ethics and virtues of the school and those of families and communities. There are no easy solutions and no easy answers to resolve these conflicts. I certainly do

not believe that they are only about one group within society or one social class. I believe they are cross-cutting in many ways, although they may be different according to social class or particular groups and cultures.

For example, some schools organise regular workshops for parents or members of the school community to learn about the school's character education provisions and to discuss common moral and educational dilemmas involving difficult decisions that affect character. Whatever practical approaches are used, the key principle is the idea that schools, families and communities try to work together in partnership. On the basis of that partnership, which includes a common language of character, we hope that difficult and complex conversations will be easier to hold and resolve as a result of the trust and sense of common purpose that has been established.

The language of character can be the basis for constructive dialogue when there are disagreements in a school community

